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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (WLAWRENCE); NEA/IPA

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMPI](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TRIP TO SOUTHERN TUNISIA: RESIDENTS TOUGH ON U.S.  
POLICIES, TOLERANT OF ISRAELI FM VISIT.

REF: TUNIS 2533

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Hudson; Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Poloff and MEPI FSN visited the southern industrial town of Gabes December 19-21 and met with ruling and opposition party leaders, NGOs, and many local residents. All interlocutors were curious, and many skeptical, about the visit of an Embassy official to this oft-overlooked southern city; criticism of US policies in Iraq and the Middle East was tempered by interest in US exchange and educational programs. Residents were mostly accepting of Israeli FM Shalom's November visit. A description of Gabes, economic and political concerns will follow septel. End Summary.

#### Skepticism and Appreciation

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¶2. (C) Several interlocutors, including members of loyal-opposition party MDS (Democratic Socialist Movement) and Karim Hamdi, a Tunisian-American from Gabes who is a professor at Oregon State University, and who has overseen U.S.-Tunisian student exchange programs, were adamant in trying to find out why a U.S diplomat had been sent to Gabes. When poloff explained that the purpose of the visit was merely a familiarization tour, to learn about areas of the country outside the capital, these contacts remained skeptical, apparently convinced the visit was part of a larger agenda. At the same time, all interlocutors expressed appreciation, at varying levels, that we were interested in learning more about Gabes, as there was a widespread sentiment that Gabes is often ignored by foreigners and does not benefit from foreign assistance or exchange programs. Hamdi strongly urged that more residents of Gabes and other small cities be recruited as participants in international visitor programs, Fulbright exchanges, etc.

¶3. (C) Poloff had attempted to arrange meetings with the local members of the Popular Democratic Party (PDP), considered one of the two independent legal opposition parties, and the president of the Gabes chapter of the independent Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH). Although we have regular contact with these groups in Tunis, the Gabes representatives refused the meeting request. They cited as reasons both internal pressure from members strongly opposed to US Iraq and Middle East policies, and also fear of unspecified retribution from Tunisian security agents for uncleared meetings with Embassy officials. Semi-independent opposition party Ettajdid leader Yusuf Hamrouni told poloff that although members of his party did not oppose his meeting with a US diplomat, he had received "significant pressure"

from close friends and relatives who sympathize with the outlawed religious-based An-Nahda party. Hamrouni expressed concern that the US was isolating itself in the Arab world by equating Islam with terrorism, but acknowledged the importance of outreach events such as White House Iftar dinners.

Iraq

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¶4. (C) Virtually every discussion included a protest of US activity in Iraq, and, to a lesser degree, in Israel/Palestine. A common theme was that the U.S., which had once been seen as a model of democracy and human rights, and whose advice on these issues was previously respected by Arab populations, had now lost all credibility due to its conduct of the war. Karim Hamdi, who identified himself as "100 percent American and 100 percent Tunisian", said that this "extreme disappointment" was expressed to him by everyone from his intellectual and professional contacts, to vegetable sellers and villagers in his home village outside of Gabes. Opposition party representatives such as Yusuf Hamrouni and MDS officials discussed this issue at length, attacking US actions in Iraq and asking poloff to explain our policy and our future plans in the region. (NB: Despite repeated attempts by our visitors, neither party representative was able to offer any comment on domestic Tunisian issues, or offer any semblance of a political platform. However, this is also true even of party leadership in Tunis.)

Shalom Visit to Tunisia

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¶5. (C) On the margins of his November visit to the World

Summit on Information Society, Israeli foreign minister Sylvan Shalom, a native Tunisian, and his mother, visited their former home in Gabes (reftel). Security, according to residents, was predictably heavy; "500 policemen" by one local's estimation. They confirmed reports that a small protest, arranged at the time by opposition party PDP, was shut down by Gabes police. Interestingly, the prevailing sentiment among Gabesians poloff questioned about the unprecedented visit was indifference. "I do not care at all," said one vendor in Gabes' central market. One restaurant manager opined that some Gabesians did not care that Shalom represented Israel, but begrudged the attention given to "a Jew." (NB: This comment is contrary to the much more widely expressed tolerance of Jews, including those living in Tunisia, that is coupled with criticism of Israel.) Poloff met with Lackrach Hedi, a lawyer, former mayor of Gabes and former Parliamentarian, who, in his role as a legal representative for "Jewish communities and interests in Tunisia," accompanied the Shalom delegation on its Gabes tour. Hedi said that Shalom was extremely grateful for the chance to see his former home, and repeated, "this is a dream," several times during the trip. Hedi said that Shalom's visit has led Jewish expatriates in Israel and Europe to plan visits to Gabes and surrounding areas, and that he expects a significant group of "pilgrims" in the coming months (NFI).

¶6. Comment: Travel outside the capital is always instructive; in this case, it was interesting to note that while we meet regularly with PDP head Chebbi and LTDH President Trifi in Tunis, their respective rank and file in Gabes maintain a boycott on USG contacts. More frequent travel by us might soften this stand. Also noteworthy, and positive, was the relative acceptance of Israeli FM Shalom's visit to his boyhood home and the possibility of more travel by Israeli and other Jews to Tunisia.

HUDSON